



EMIGRANT TRAILS HALL OF FAME

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

Merle W. Wells

In his long career at the Idaho State Historical Society (ISHS) Merle Wells became widely regarded as one of the most knowledgeable and respected historians of the Northwest.

Born in Canada, Wells moved to Boise with his family in 1930. He was a graduate of College of Idaho and received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of California, Berkeley.

Wells was a summer volunteer at ISHS during the 1940s and became a staff member in 1956. He initiated Idaho's state highway historical marker program and wrote the texts for the majority of the more than 200 markers created during his years at ISHS. The program received an award of merit from the American Association for State and Local History and served as a model for other states. He also established *Idaho Yesterdays*, the scholarly journal of ISHS.

Wells wrote the legislation creating the Idaho State Archives and was head of the National Register of Historic Places program in Idaho. He also helped organize local historical societies and served as Idaho's first state preservation officer. He walked nearly every mile of the Oregon Trail.

He was the author of about 15 books and numerous articles about Idaho and the region. His books include *Gold Camps and Silver Cities: Nineteenth Century Mining in Central and Southern Idaho*; *Idaho: An Illustrated History*; *Anti-Mormonism in Idaho 1872-92*; *Boise: An Illustrated History*; and *Thunder in the Mountains: The Story of the Nez Perce War*.

After his retirement in 1986 Wells became State Historian Emeritus. He bicycled to ISHS nearly every day to conduct research and to help the staff and visitors as a volunteer. After his death in 2000 a tribute to him in the *Idaho Statesman* noted that he was buried with his passport, a battered straw hat, a pocketful of pens and notes, an Idaho road map and copies of his nominations of the Lolo Trail and Silver City for the National Register of Historic Places. The Merle W. Wells Research Center at the Idaho State Archives was dedicated in 2012 in connection with the Idaho Territory Sesquicentennial.

Biography

- Born: 1918, Lethbridge, Alberta
- Died: 2000, Boise, Idaho
- Noted Idaho historian and author

Achievements

- Idaho State Historian
- Established the Idaho State Archives, State Historic Preservation Office and the state highway historical marker program